The Eastland Disaster

An Incredible Tragedy in the Heart of Chicago

By Ernest P. Bicknell

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***Editor's Note.**-The system of operation in relief work of the American Red Cross following domestic disasters is aptly illustrated by Mr. Bicknell's interesting and dispassionate account of what happened following the capsizing of the Eastland and the drowning of upwards of a thousand persons in the Chicago River July 24. The newly organized Chicago Red Cross Chapter, whose members number hundreds of Chicago's foremost professional men and merchants and their wives, and the United Charities Association of Chicago, which is the institutional member of the American Red Cross, were immediately "on the job." Within a few hours after the frightful happening-the same day-the National Director of the American Red Cross was speeding on his way from national headquarters in Washington to Chicago. On arriving there, although Mr. Bicknell does not mention it in his account, the relief work, according to press dispatches, was placed largely under his direction-his and Mr. J. J. O'Connor's, the Director of the Central Division of the American Red Cross and Secretary of the Chicago Chapter. The same day of the disaster Miss Mabel T. Boardman, as Chairman of the National Relief Board of the American Red Cross, telegraphed Governor Edward F. Dunne, of Illinois, as follows:*

"The American Red Cross expresses deepest sympathy in overwhelming disaster to so many of the people of Chicago. Mr. Ernest P. Bicknell, National Director, leaves immediately for Chicago to be of all assistance possible. Mr. J. J. O'Connor, Director, Central Division, has placed Red Cross and local chapter at disposition of Chicago for relief work."

The excursion steamer Eastland was the center of a gay throng of merrymakers as she lay at her dock in Chicago River early in the morning of Saturday, July 24. Employes of the Western Electric Company, composing an organization known as the Hawthorne Club, were starting for their annual picnic, forty miles away across the lake, at Michigan City, Indiana. The members of the club, with their friends, had chartered four steamers for the occasion. The first of these steamers to receive its passengers was the Eastland. As early as 6 o'clock people began to go aboard, and by 7 o'clock the capacity of the ship was exhausted and United States Government inspectors had ordered the captain of the Eastland to take in the gangplank and refuse to permit any more excursionists to board her. At that time about twenty-five hundred people crowded the decks and cabins of the vessel. The lines which held her to the dock were about to be loosed and a tug had come alongside and attached a hawser for the purpose of towing the ship into the stream.

At about 7 o'clock it was noticed that the steamer was listing somewhat toward the dock. This caused some comment among the passengers and among the crowd on shore, but did not cause any panic. The "Eastland" was a water ballast ship, and the ballast compartments had been emptied. The listing was caused by the fact that the passengers were crowded upon the decks, while the keel lacked the weight which should have been provided by full ballast tanks.

The Boat Rolls Over

Engineers of the boat, observing the listing, undertook to fill the ballast tanks in order to right it and steady it. Presently the boat rolled slowly away from the dock until it listed in an alarming angle toward the river. This permitted water to pour into the lowest port holes in the hull and through the open gangway on the lower deck. The passengers, unable to maintain their places, slid down the sloping decks toward the rail on the low side. Then the combined weight of passengers and inflowing water caused the Eastland to roll over on her side. The passengers on the upper deck were thrown into the river, while those below decks found themselves entrapped and unable to escape the water.

Small boats and tugs hurried to the rescue; the Government lifesaving crew was on hand in a few minutes, and many men on shore leaped into the water to assist in rescuing the drowning people. It was a moment of indescribable excitement. Most of the passengers who had been on the upper deck were saved, but the loss among those who were helplessly entrapped below decks was very great.

Over nine hundred persons were drowned from the gay throng which a few moments before had been the envy of the people on shore who were attracted by their singing and merry shouts. Police hurried to the dock and restored order, doctors and nurses came by scores to do what was possible toward the resuscitation of those drawn from the water, city firemen swarmed on the hull of the overturned ship, which projected several feet above the surface of the river and began breaking holes through the side in an effort to rescue imprisoned passengers. A large room in the big wholesale house of Reid, Murdoch & Co., was thrown open as a receiving place for both dead and living. The great stores in the vicinity sent truckloads of blankets, cots and other supplies, the city health commissioner quickly called the nurses of his department into service, and everything possible was done to save the living and recover the dead.

Relief Measures Taken

Mr. John J. O'Connor, director of the Central Division of the American Red Cross and secretary of the Chicago Red Cross Chapter, was early on the ground and took charge of the large receiving room above mentioned. Later the Second Regiment Armory was thrown open to receive the bodies of the drowned, whereupon on the floor of a vast room the dead were laid in rows, while tender hands composed their features and limbs and arrangements were rapidly made for the admission of relatives and friends who sought to identify those who were lost.

Miss Minnie F. Ahrens, chairman of the Chicago Red Cross Nurses Committee, established an emergency station in the armory and had many Red Cross nurses on duty day and night. Between midnight and 7 a.m. of the first night thirty hysterical and exhausted women were cared for in this station.

William Hale Thompson, mayor of Chicago, had gone to San Francisco to participate in the exercises attending the opening of the Illinois Building at the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Acting Mayor Moorehouse called a meeting of the Mayor's Committee, which is an advisory body of prominent citizens, and on Sunday, July 25, this committee decided to take steps to collect a relief fund. At the same time the Western Electric Company announced that it had appropriated $100,000 as a relief fund for the benefit of families of its employes who had suffered from the disaster.

At the meeting of the Mayor's Committee it was decided to issue an appeal for a fund of $200,000, and at the same meeting the Chicago Chapter of the Red Cross was unanimously requested to take full charge of the actual work of relief and the expenditure of whatever funds were received. On the same day the Red Cross established temporary headquarters in the offices of the Western Electric Company, where the Red Cross agents and the agents of the company could work together in identifying the dead and in visiting the afflicted families.

Immediate provision was made for the temporary relief of any who required instant assistance. During the two days following, contributions to the relief fund far exceeded the amount of $200,000 which had been mentioned in the appeal by the Mayor's Committee. The chairman of the Mayor's Committee is Mr. James Simpson, of Marshall Field & Company, and Mr. Julius Rosenwald, head of Sears, Roebuck & Company, is chairman of the Finance Committee in whose name the appeal was issued. As this account is written, toward the end of the second week following the disaster, the general relief fund exceeds $350,000 not including the $100,000 given by the Western Electric Company. All the families who have suffered from the disaster have been visited and their temporary wants satisfied. The dead are all buried with the exception possibly of a few bodies which have not yet been recovered from the wreck, and the organization for relief is in full and quiet operation.

Institutional Member Is Active

Naturally, the Red Cross turned instantly to its institutional member in Chicago, the Chicago United Charities, for a staff of experienced agents. The United Charities responded by placing the services of twenty-five of its experienced people under the direction of Mr. O'Connor, who took executive charge of the Red Cross work. Numerous other public and private agencies also contributed the services of efficient workers. The nurses and doctors of the City Health Department gave valuable service. The City Department of Public Welfare, the County Bureau of Public Welfare, the Juvenile Protective Association, the Bureau of Personal Service, the Associated Jewish Charities, the Associated Charities of suburban towns, the benevolent organizations of the nationalities especially affected by the disaster, such as those of the Polish and Bohemian people, and other organizations were generous in contributing their employes and executive officers to the work of relief. The welfare department of the Western Electric Company, which is a strong and well organized agency, has worked in the closest co-operation with the Red Cross, giving its own efforts to the families of the company's employes. The company has a well established system of death benefits, pensions for disability, and benevolent funds, and the help which is to come to the bereaved families from this source is an important factor in the solution of the relief problem.

First Task of New Chapter

The Red Cross has organized an Advisory Committee, consisting of representatives of some of the nationalities which have suffered most, the heads of the City Department of Public Welfare and the County Bureau of Public Welfare, and representatives of the more important Catholic and Jewish charities, as well as a number of persons who are especially experienced in dealing with relief problems. Of this committee Mr. Sherman C. Kingsley is chairman. The Advisory Committee will sit as a sort of jury, to consider the facts in relation to each family which requires assistance, and will recommend to the Red Cross what in its opinion is the proper action to take in each instance. Plans for the final distribution of the fund are not yet completed. Numerous factors must be given full consideration in preparation of such a plan. Questions of insurance, indebtedness, material resources, earning capacity, health, etc., are as yet unknown factors of the situation, upon which information is being rapidly collected.

As this is the first important task which has been undertaken by the new Chicago Chapter of the Red Cross especial interest attaches to the huge piece of work in the minds of the eleven hundred members of the Chapter. Many members of the Mayor's Committee are also members of the board of directors of the chapter. The newspapers are exhibiting a friendly and helpful spirit and Mayor Thompson, who has now returned to the city, has expressed approval of what has been done to date.

Photographs in Original Publication

1. **Cover image:** Raising the ill-fated excursion steamer Eastland after the black tragedy in the Chicago River, July 24. [Tug "Favorite" visible alongside]

2. **Page 306:** Recovering bodies from the Chicago River and the hold of the steamer Eastland. *Photo Copyright, Underwood & Underwood.*

3. **Page 307:** Scene shortly after the Eastland rolled over.

4. **Page 308:** Another view of the Eastland wreck. [Reid, Murdoch & Co. wholesale building visible in background]

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